

KEEP LOOKING FOR JESUS

(04/18/10)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 24:13-31

“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.” (Luke 24:30-31)

On Easter Sunday the church is beautifully decorated with lilies, tulips, and the palms that are the lingering reminders of Palm Sunday. Though it wasn't true in our church this year, attendance is usually twice what it is on other Sundays.

On Easter Sunday our worship is graced with special music. The minister tries to preach an inspiring sermon, a sermon that captures the essence of the Resurrection, the kind of sermon that will hopefully entice the visitor or the once or twice a year congregant to attend worship more regularly in the year to come. By the way, I have yet to see that work, even when I have preached what I believe to be a dynamite sermon.

When we reflect on the extra preparation and effort that goes into our Easter Sunday worship service, we are tempted to conclude that Easter Sunday is more important than other Sundays. Is this really true?

In his last week with his disciples, Jesus tells them he is going to die. The disciples are confused and dismayed. Then Jesus tells them that this is not the end of the story. Just as the grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die to bear fruit, so also he needs to die to bear fruit. He tells them he will rise from the dead, that he will be present to them and to the world in a new way. It is doubtful whether the disciples understand the second half of his teaching or that after the crucifixion they even remember what he had said.

Jesus is placed in the tomb shortly before sundown on Friday, the day he was crucified. Because the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown, no work, including the burial of the dead, can take place on the Sabbath. Sometime between Friday night and

Sunday morning Jesus rises from the dead. When the women arrive at the tomb shortly before dawn on the “first day of the week,” they discover that the stone has been removed and the tomb is empty.

As I mentioned on Easter Sunday, it seems to me that the central message of our faith is not that Jesus died for us, though we believe that to be true. The central message is not that the tomb was empty, though we also believe that to be true. The central message is not even the affirmation that Jesus rose from the dead, though we believe that to be true as well.

It seems to me that the central message of the Gospel, the cornerstone of our faith, is the proclamation that Jesus lives, that he lives in the world and also in us. The most important part of the Easter story is not Easter Sunday but what happens *after* Easter Sunday. It is how, in their post-resurrection encounters with Jesus, Mary and the other disciples rediscover him -- in the world and also in their lives.

This morning I would like to push that Easter theme one step further. I think the central message of the Resurrection is not the proclamation, the belief that Jesus lives in the world and also in us. It is the *discovery* that Jesus lives in the world and also in us. When we discover or rediscover Jesus in our lives, resurrection is no longer a matter of religious belief; it becomes a matter of personal experience. When we rediscover Jesus in the world and also within us, we will no longer believe; we will *know*.

Someone once said that the problem with many Christians is that they find Jesus in scripture or in the teachings of the church and then they stop looking. If this is true, it might explain why some people come to church on Easter Sunday but not on any other Sundays during the year. Once we find him we don't have to search any longer.

When we examine the descriptions of the post-resurrection experiences, we discover that the four gospels differ in their accounts of what happened, in their descriptions of what Mary and the other disciples experienced on “the first day of the week” (the day that we celebrate as Easter Sunday) and on the days that follow.

In the Gospel of Mark, the first of the gospels to be written, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bring spices to the tomb to anoint the body. When they arrive, they discover the stone has already been rolled away. A young man, dressed in a white robe, tells them that Jesus has been raised, that he is not here. The angel tells the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee, where they will see him. The women have no direct encounter with Jesus at the tomb. Overcome with terror, they don't even do as the angel instructed. They say nothing about what they experienced to the disciples.

In the Gospel of Matthew, which was written approximately twenty years after the Gospel of Mark, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to the tomb. Suddenly there is a great earthquake as an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, comes and rolls back the stone. The angel tells the women not to be afraid for Jesus is not in the tomb; he has been raised. Once again, the women have no direct encounter with Jesus at the tomb. Jesus encounters them briefly while they are on the way to tell the disciples what has happened.

In the Gospel of Luke, which was written approximately the same time as the Gospel of Matthew, Mary and the other women see two men in dazzling clothes sitting in the empty tomb. The men ask the women why they seek the living among the dead. This is a wonderful question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" They remind the women how Jesus told them he would be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and rise again. According to Luke, the women tell the disciples of their experience, but the disciples do not believe them.

It is only in the gospel of John, the last of the gospels to be written, that Mary encounters Jesus at the tomb. Mary at first believes Jesus to be the gardener. It is only when Jesus calls her name that she recognizes him. Jesus tells her not to touch him because he has "not yet ascended to the Father." He then tells her to go to the other disciples and tell them that he is ascending "to my Father and your Father, to my

God and your God.” Mary tells the disciples that she has seen the Lord. John gives us no indication of how the disciples received or responded to this news.

As we heard in our scripture lesson this morning, later that very day two of the disciples are walking on the road to Emmaus. They are probably heading back home. Little more than a rumor spread by a woman had whispered its way out of the night of their despair. Though they are traveling in daylight, the disciples dwell in darkness.

As they journey homeward, confused and dejected, Jesus appears and walks along with them. The disciples see him and talk to him but they do not recognize him.

The disciples tell their traveling companion what has happened. They tell him about the crucifixion. They mention how the women told them that their Lord has risen from the dead. Jesus patiently listens to their account. Finally he can restrain himself no longer. He says, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe . . .”

In this statement Jesus implies that it is not because of a problem with their eyes and ears that they do not recognize him. It is because of a problem with their heart. He does not accuse them of being deaf and blind, but of being “slow of heart.” I think that is a profound observation or accusation. Perhaps, like the disciples, we should think about what it would mean to be “slow of heart,” the impact that this would have on our faith as well as our relationships.

Why are the disciples unable to recognize Jesus? One option is that Jesus may have appeared in a human form but in a slightly different human form. He may not have looked like himself. This would explain why Mary does not recognize him at the tomb and why the disciples do not recognize their traveling companion. However, I am unable to understand why this would happen, why Jesus would either disguise himself or why the dead should reappear in a different form. The accounts of the encounters in scripture give us no reason to believe that this is what actually happened.

I would like to suggest another possibility. It is possible that Mary and the two disciples don't see Jesus because they aren't looking for him. Because they aren't

looking for him as a living presence in the world and in their lives, they see but they do not perceive, they see but they do not know what it is that they see. Their lack of belief, their lack of trust or faith prevents them from seeing what is right before their eyes.

The two disciples witnessed their Lord's crucifixion. They were there when his body was laid in the tomb. They are in mourning, suffering the experience of a tremendous loss. However, contrary to what they believe, Jesus is not dead. He is not separate from them. He is with them that very moment. In fact, he is with them even more fully now that he has risen from the dead. He is with them wherever they go. He is walking with them even when they believe they are walking alone.

When they sit at table with Jesus, the disciples' eyes are opened. They suddenly realize that they are in the presence of their Lord. First they see with their heart, then they see with their eyes. When we see with our heart, we will be able to experience Jesus' presence. Then we will know the true meaning of Easter.

Note that the disciples are not looking for Jesus. This is probably why they don't see him or why they don't recognize him even when he is standing next to them. If we, like the disciples, are not looking for Jesus, it might explain why we never see him or experience his presence. It might explain why we feel that we are walking the difficult and painful road of life alone, when in reality Jesus is walking with us.

I think we should take heart when we recall that even though the disciples weren't looking for Jesus, Jesus was looking for them. Even when they weren't attempting to approach Jesus through prayer or worship, Jesus was approaching them, was reaching out to them as they walked the dusty road to Emmaus. Like the disciples, even when we are not looking for Jesus, Jesus is looking for us; even when we are not reaching out to Jesus, Jesus is reaching out to us.

After their epiphany, the disciples realize that they cannot grasp or hold onto even this new and difference experience of their Lord. As soon as they recognize him he vanishes from their midst. They later encounter him in other ways and places. The

eternal Christ is no longer limited by his incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth. There are now no limits to the ways that his followers might experience him, the places where they might see him.

How can we experience our risen Lord? We can experience him in worship and in the sacraments. We can experience him in music that touches our souls. We can experience him in prayer. If we open both our mind and our heart, we may experience our risen Lord in some barely discernible stirring within us. We may hear him speak to us, comfort us, and set our feet on the path he would have us walk.

Jesus promises us that those who truly seek will find. If we look for Jesus, we will find him. If we do not look, like the disciples, we will see but not perceive.

If we see the world through the eyes of faith, we will see how Jesus is trying to usher in a reign of peace and justice, how he is trying to create a community of caring and compassion. If we see through the eyes of faith, we will see the face of Jesus in our brothers and sisters. If we see through the eyes of faith, we will see ourselves as children of God and not only disciples but apostles. As we rediscover Jesus, we will rediscover ourselves in new and powerful ways.

As we journey forth in this Easter season, let us pray that Jesus will open our eyes, that we will not only see but actually perceive, that we will recognize our risen Lord in every corner of our lives. Let us pray that, like the disciples, we will see the glimpses of truth that are revealed to us, that the slowness of our hearts might be quickened, and that we might be set free from everything that holds us back from fullness of life.

As we journey forth in this Easter season and throughout the seasons of our lives, let us never stop looking for Jesus.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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